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The Sporting News

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Leading Off: The First Years of *The Sporting News Archives*

Steven P. Gietschier

Since *Roots* helped Americans discover an interest in genealogy, archival work has changed in many ways. One of these is the definition of what constitutes basic archival research. When most archival patrons were scholars, archivists tended to assume that they would ask the traditional historical questions: Why did the North win the Civil War?, for example, or Was General Longstreet a good strategist? Genealogists began to ask simpler, more fundamental questions--not Why did the North win the Civil War, but Did my great-grandfather fight in the Civil War? And they did so by the busload, forcing archivists to rewire reference operations.

Much of the work a sports archivist does involves this new kind of reference. Large numbers of researchers--more often by phone or letter than in person--ask specific, detailed questions at a level at least as basic as the genealogist's query. The information these patrons seek can be branded as pure fact. The data are nearly devoid of interpretation or analysis and almost

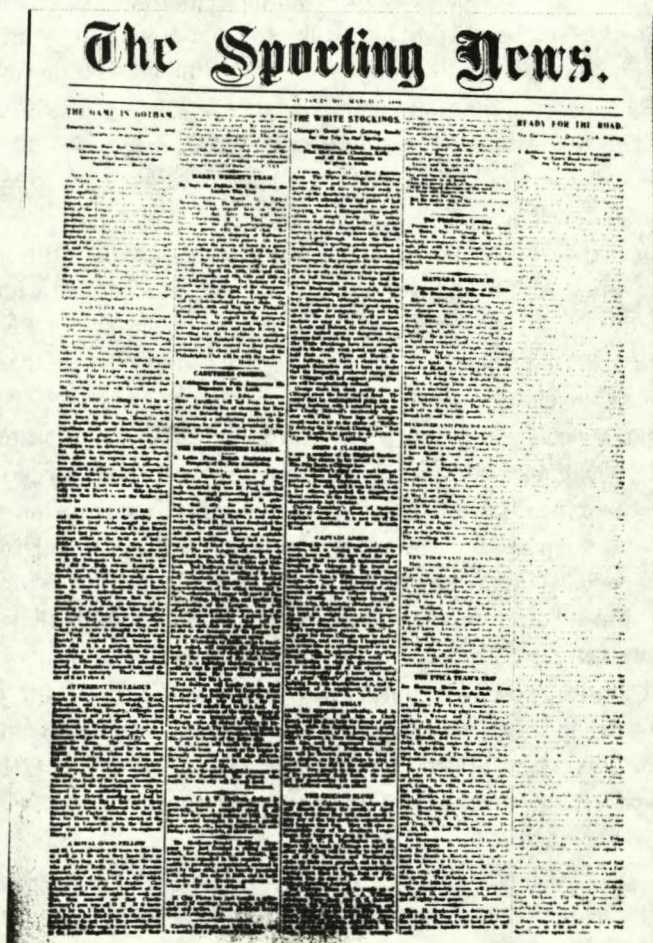
always concern statistics. Were these users interested in the Civil War, to complete the analogy, they would ask, How many bullets were used?

Besides this different and elemental approach to reference, work at *The Sporting News* archives is anomalous in two other ways that might startle many an archivist in more conventional employment. The first, as is the case with a few other business archives, is that the archivist is obliged to generate uses for the materials that will produce revenue for the company. And the second is that this repository does not house the vast quantities of official corporate records that are the heart of traditional business archives collections.

The Sporting News published its first weekly issue on 17 March 1886, but it took the company more than a century to create a genuine archives. A family-owned enterprise for its first ninety-one years, the publication was started by St. Louis sports entrepreneur Alfred H. Spink and later taken over by his brother Charles. He bequeathed it to his son, J. G. Taylor Spink, who passed it in turn to his son, C. C. Johnson Spink. Having no heirs, Johnson Spink sold the company to the Times Mirror Corporation in 1977.

At its outset, *The Sporting News* was designed to appeal to what sport historian John R. Betts called "the barroom fraternity," gentlemen of leisure interested in politics, the theatre, and sports. *The Sporting News* gave its early readers heavy doses of baseball. But in addition, there were regular columns on "The Wheel," "The Gun," "The Stage," "The Ring," and "The Turf." Slowly, over about a quarter century, baseball pushed all the others out, so much so that in the 1920s, the paper earned the unofficial sobriquet "The Bible of Baseball." This nickname has endured to this day although it has not been accurate for nearly fifty years. For it was in 1942 that the magazine began to cover football, basketball, and hockey--in season at first and then year round.

Still, as *The Sporting News* celebrated its centennial in March 1986, it was without an archives. Most of the record materials



The Sporting News published its first weekly issue on 17 March 1886. There was baseball on page 1 plus stories on harness racing and wrestling. Inside was other news of baseball and columns called "The Wheel," "The Gun," "The Stage," "The Ring," and "The Turf." Baseball coverage gradually pushed all other sports out, but football, basketball, and hockey stories were reintroduced in 1942. (Reprinted by permission of *The Sporting News*.)

and historical treasures were jammed into one small office and an adjoining storage area called the vault. It really was a vault, with reinforced steel-and-concrete walls and a bank vault door. The combination, incidentally, was 4-0-6, Ted Williams's batting average in 1941, the last time any major leaguer has hit .400. Space was so tight that when an archivist was hired, his desk had to be placed inside the vault, forcing him each day to open the combination lock just to get to work.

Reliance on an allegedly fireproof room with a vault door as a substitute for an archives says a lot about how people with good intentions may conceptualize the problem of caring for historical materials. Their perceptions lend support to the theory that there are certain classes of archivists--primarily business archivists and religious archivists--whose first outreach task is to educate their own colleagues and superiors. Any new employee has to learn how to adapt to an existing situation, when to suggest change and when to keep quiet. The newly employed business archivist faces an especially interesting version of this challenge by moving into a for-profit situation and proposing to spend considerable sums of money with the prospect of very little return. Trying to explain what an archives is, how it works, and what it can do for people who are only casually acquainted with the term is a continuing lesson in self-justification. The experience reinforces the old proverb that one really does not learn anything unless one is forced to teach it.

The Sporting News was blessed with a chief executive officer whose plans for the company's modernization included an archives. He had the good sense to consult Anne Kenney, then with the University of Missouri-St. Louis and a member of the Society of American Archivists (SAA) Council, on the records situation. She made the fortunate judgment that the company needed to hire an archivist, and it can be assumed that she helped with the job description and the advertisement that appeared in the *SAA Newsletter*.

Prior to Anne Kenney's needs assessment study, all historical materials were under the nominal control of the company's historian, a forty-year veteran who had previously been chief copy editor. He was an intelligent man with a real expertise in baseball history and an earnest desire to do well by the materials. But he was not an archivist, and certain of his practices would have caused any archivist concern. The company library, for example, was stored on open shelves just outside the vault area. Approximately four thousand volumes were loosely arranged into five categories: baseball, football, basketball, hockey, and other. They were not catalogued and sat there to be picked off the shelves by anyone for any length of time, even permanently in some cases. In addition, many of the most valuable materials were not kept in the vault at all, but instead overflowed into the already crowded adjoining office area.

Once an archivist was employed, the chief executive officer assigned him to prepare a budget and to help design a building addition that became the real archives. Here again was an opportunity to teach others what the archival profession is all about. The approved budget included funds for temperature and humidity controls, compact shelving, ultraviolet light shields, and a discrete security system. The vault door is no more. Since these initial capital outlays, the archives has been able to purchase an array of archival and library supplies, standard equipment to the trade that was nevertheless foreign to other employees. Most amazing was the reaction caused by the arrival of the microfilm reader-printer, the purchase of which enabled the company to retire bound volumes of *The Sporting News* and force the use of film. The reader-printer proved to be a strange innovation, even to members of the editorial staff (college graduates all) and second in wonder only to the compact shelving that more than one visitor has misidentified as "a row of little safes."

Slightly more than a year-and-a-half after moving into the new facility, the archives was pretty much in place, albeit with a

processing backlog. Blocks of time were allotted to arrangement and description as well as reference. The archivist also began to work on special projects designed to turn the company's historical treasures into a source of revenue. This is surely a strange notion for most archivists, especially those employed by not-for-profit institutions, but company officials are convinced that archival holdings can and should be exploited for commercial gain. Developing the archives into a profit center was, in fact, a phrase included in the job description. Thus, the archives has been involved with several proposals to license the use of the company's name, its logo, and some of its resources. Outside firms have contracted to produce baseball cards, tankards, and other sports collectible items. In the near future, the archives anticipates working with other businesses willing to pay a fee to convert *The Sporting News* and other company publications to machine-readable formats.

Of what, then, does this sports archives consist? Well, it is not yet and may never be a traditional business archives, that is, the final resting place for company records that have gone through the records management process. The archives would like to do that, of course, in part because the company's warehouse area is chock full of file cabinets filled with records not subject to any schedule. But a business archivist is as a business archivist does; and, frankly, the archives does not get one reference request in a thousand that has anything to do with the corporate history of *The Sporting News Publishing Company*.

What people do want to know about is sports, and they rely on *The Sporting News* as an important source for accurate information. The archivist does reference work for the editorial staff, of course, to support a growing list of publications. He also serves as a source of sports information for a wide variety of telephone callers and correspondents. Tallies show an average of about 350 phone calls and 40 letters a month from people who often identify themselves as subscribers. A certain portion of this

reference work is no more than a response to local callers in St. Louis, people who are not burdened by the cost of a long-distance phone call. These calls tend to increase in number, interestingly enough, when the baseball Cardinals play an afternoon game. Apparently a good chunk of St. Louis residents listens to these games on the radio, arguing sports with colleagues, and calling



J. G. Taylor Spink made *The Sporting News* indispensable reading for everyone connected with the game. Spink was known as a demanding and irascible workaholic who seemed to live with a telephone on his ear. Correspondents insist that he could track them down anywhere at any time. (Reprinted by permission of *The Sporting News*.)

The Sporting News to resolve disputes. Questions run the gamut from the current (What's the score of the game?) to the historical (Who was the winning pitcher in the last game of the 1946 World Series?) to the truly absurd (How many cars can be parked in the lot at the Hula Bowl?).

More seriously, the archives regularly assists print journalists, radio and television stations, publishing houses, freelance writers, club and league officials, players' associations, former players and their families, attorneys, agents, students and their parents, fantasy league participants, and scholars. The archivist has assisted Larry Bird's unauthorized biographer, the research staff of "Jeopardy!", the NBC Seoul Olympic crew, several productions of the play *I'm Not Rappaport*, the film *Bull Durham*, and former Oakland A's owner Charlie Finley, to name just a few. Trying to satisfy as many of these supplicants as possible, the archives has found it necessary to draw a slightly ill-defined line between legitimate reference requests and questions too obscure to answer. Some may tend to call this latter category trivia, but a sports archives cannot be totally opposed to answering trivia questions. What is important is to develop a sense of how practical a question is and how long it will take to find the answer, and to beg off if the time involved would be excessive. Most patrons understand. Naturally, *The Sporting News* also offers a research-for-pay option that serves as a polite deterrent in some cases and a satisfactory business arrangement in others.

Short of huge quantities of traditional corporate records, the archives's holdings begin with microfilm: *The Sporting News* itself; a second company publication, *The Sporting Goods Dealer*, a monthly trade journal; annual statistics produced for the National and American Leagues; some nineteenth-century sporting papers; and a copy of the Albert Spalding Papers held by the New York Public Library. Next there is the library of about five thousand volumes now, covering all sports but focusing on the four major sports to which the newspaper gives intense editorial coverage:

baseball, basketball, football, and hockey. This total does not include the company's own publications, some of which have been updated yearly since the 1940s. In particular, the archives relies on the annual guides and registers to the four major sports, the guides being comprehensive reviews in text and statistics of the previous season, and the registers statistical encyclopedias to active players.

The archives also has administrative responsibility for the newspaper's morgue, envelopes stuffed with clippings from *The Sporting News* and a host of other newspapers. The morgue is not located in the archives, in part because it fills more than 150 file drawers. Nevertheless, the editor did ask the archivist to reorganize the files which had grown enormously without anyone's attempting to control them. At first, the morgue was divided into two parts, "Baseball" and "All Sports." Alphabetically arranged, each part contained both biographical and subject files. The biographical files were not in such bad shape, but the subject files were an absolute mess, lacking any sort of index or filing scheme. Material on baseball's league championship series, for example, could be found under L for League, C for Championship, and P for Playoffs. Two years later, the reorganization was complete. The biographical files were physically separated from the subject files and clearly labelled. New clippings are filed by only two individuals whose decisions are guided by a subject index maintained in the WordPerfect software package.

Incidentally, the photo morgue--some several hundred thousand images--is under the direct control of the photo editor, but the archives is regularly involved in the sale of prints for personal use, for publication, and for advertising. In most cases, *The Sporting News* owns the photographs it holds and can transfer one-time rights for a standard and reasonable fee. When this is not so, the company splits the fee with the photographer at no additional charge to the patron.

Beyond the morgue, the archives has a special collection of newspaper tearsheets, not in the best of condition, but still valuable to the editors. Someone who used to work for *The Sporting News* while living in New Jersey saved the sports pages of several New York City dailies just during the baseball season, April through early October, from 1917 to 1953. The collection is deteriorating, of course, and should someday be transferred to film.

With regard to primary source documentation, the archives does indeed possess some unpublished materials, including correspondence between Ty Cobb and the late publisher J. G. Taylor Spink; some records from baseball's rules committee; and a box or two of unorganized materials from Ban Johnson, founder of the American League. Add to this list two priceless resources: first, the Charles Martin Conlon collection of glass plate negatives and, second, the player card file. Photographer Charles Conlon worked in New York from about 1905 to 1940. He was employed by a New York newspaper but worked also for A. G. Spalding & Brothers and *The Sporting News*. When he retired, he sold *The Sporting News* a collection of about five thousand glass plate negatives, most of them shots of baseball players. The richness of this collection, both as baseball resource and as photographic resource, is almost indescribable. Conlon was a first-rate photographer whose images were well conceived and remarkably sharp. Suffice it to say that his work was good enough for the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian to mount an exhibit of Conlon photographs called "Baseball Immortals, 1905-1935" that hung in Washington and later became part of the Smithsonian's traveling exhibit or SITES program.

The player card file is a unique resource, a collection of three-by-five-inch cards covering the contract history of almost everyone who has ever signed to play professional baseball. There are gaps, but the truth is that if someone claims to have played

professional ball and there is no card for him, then the careful researcher must doubt the claimant's veracity.

It is hoped that this survey of holdings, with its seeming lack of traditional archival materials, does not offend the sense of what an archives is supposed to be. First of all, in terms of preservation and arrangement and description, more is being done correctly than has ever been done before. Secondly, the archives is serving the research needs of the staff more efficiently than was possible previously. Thirdly, the archives has made its presence known to the scholarly community so that the traditional users of archives can work with the materials. In addition, the holdings as they are have enabled the archives to develop a reference service to the public that produces much good will and few complaints even when the information requested cannot be produced. There seems to be an assumption on the part of these sports researchers that if *The Sporting News* does not have the answer, then it truly must be unavailable.

But there is a deeper reason for this high level of satisfaction, and that involves the basic nature of much sports history research. Baseball researchers have their own organization, the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR), which in its early years placed an emphasis on exploring the sport through the use of new statistical techniques, but quickly fell back on a much broader but less sophisticated research agenda. The word *sabrematrician* was coined to identify these new statistical whiz kids, but most of them are content simply to assemble facts that have not been gathered before or to reshape data that has already been published. When SABR announced the creation of the archives to its members, the archivist braced for an inundation of researchers. It did not happen, fortunately, and the archives has been able without much difficulty to balance serving this particular type of reference patron with other job responsibilities.

Creating an archives from scratch is surely one of the most exciting challenges an archivist can face, providing a chance to

exercise skills and talents honed elsewhere in a completely fresh environment. Moving from the not-for-profit world to a business setting adds another element of dash. But hitting lead-off for *The Sporting News* archives is, for the archivist who is also a sports fan, a special treat, a rare opportunity to combine vocation with avocation, to blur the harsh distinction between work and play.

Steven P. Gietschier has been Director of Historical Records at *The Sporting News* since 1986. He worked previously at the Ohio Historical Society and the South Carolina Department of Archives and History in Columbia from where he used to journey to Atlanta to watch the Braves lose.